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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 05 BAGHDAD 000933

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: BAGHDAD U.: STUDENTS TALK POLITICS, OFFER BLUNT VIEWS ABOUT TODAY'S IRAQ -- AND US

**¶11. (U) SUMMARY:** Poloffs met for two hours on April 2 at Baghdad University with eight professors, the acting president, and approximately 120 students from the political science college. The group offered frank views about the U.S. decision to invade Iraq, what had happened in the country since 2003, as well as a number of "hard versus soft" power issues -- with many advocating less military might and more cultural and education initiatives. One graduate student proudly proclaimed that he was the university's "only neo-con scholar" and then proceeded to name these members of the former U.S. administration. The acting university president noted that 70 professors (of the university's 330 faculty) had been murdered during the height of sectarian violence (2006-2007); however, he added that Baghdad University -- citing its 50 year-old history as the country's leading institution of higher learning -- had kept its doors open to "keep the university alive; the studying never stopped." A third-year student said Iraqis had "removed the sectarianism with our own blood and by the sacrifices of our own people." Another inquired about official U.S. policy in Iraq: democracy or stability? All urged the Embassy to continue to engage the group, with several openly asking Poloffs "why did it take you so long to come here?" END SUMMARY.

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BAGHDAD UNIVERSITY: NO DAYS OFF,  
INCLUDING DURING DARKEST DAYS

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**¶12. (U)** Baghdad University is Iraq's leading institution of higher education and one of the largest universities in the Arab world. Its campus is clean but dilapidated. Students walking in small groups greeted us wearily upon entry. Banners advertising the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) appear regularly. Riyad Hadi Aziz, the deputy president, welcomed Poloffs and recounted the university's 50-year history. He talked about Baghdad University as a bastion for the Iraqi state and the creation of numerous colleges within it, including engineering and law. He movingly reminded everyone that during the "dark days" of sectarian violence -- when 70 of its 330 faculty were murdered -- classes continued to be held, in order to "keep the university alive; the studying never stopped." By the end of the morning, an entourage of students walked us to our vehicles, excitedly chatting and snapping digital photos with us. And they asked us back for more visits.

**¶13. (U)** The "College of Political Science" was founded in

1959, later re-organized in 1969 and 1987. It has three departments and one research unit (international studies, political thought, and political systems and the third world). A research unit on political studies includes 26 researchers. Degrees are offered at the B.A., Masters and Ph.D. levels in political science.

14. (U) Course curriculum (by year for the B.A. degree)  
includes:

-FIRST YEAR: Constitutional law and comparative political systems; the principles of political science; history of international relations; introduction to political science "in English"; human rights and public liberties; economics; introduction to the study of law; Arabic language; computer Qintroduction to the study of law; Arabic language; computer science.

-SECOND YEAR: International relations; international organizations ("in English"); public administration; political sociology; ancient and mid-level political thought; public international law; political problems in Asia, Africa, Latin America; contemporary political developments in Iraq.

-THIRD YEAR: International organizations; strategy; political parties; modern political thought; Arab and Islamic political thought; contemporary political development in the Arab home land (with special emphasis on the states of Arabia and the Gulf); international economic relations; contemporary political systems ("in English").

-FOURTH YEAR: Diplomacy; foreign policy; political systems

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of Turkey and Iran; contemporary political thought; contemporary Islamic political thought; international politics ("in English"); the Palestinian Question; public opinion; political research.

NOTE: The students urged the Embassy to assist the faculty and Baghdad University gain more opportunities for English language training and computer and Internet access. END NOTE.

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THE STUDENTS,  
AND ONE PROF.  
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15. (U) While initially reluctant, the large group of political science students soon engaged in a lively back-and-forth across a number of issues. After offering brief introductions, Poloffs made clear at the outset that any question could be raised, with no limit on subjects. About one-third were women (including one 2nd year student who asked the first question). They appeared to represent a diverse cross-section of the capital and Iraq more widely. One professor said the student body was comprised of many students "who study by day and work by night" in order to cover living costs.

16. (U) One of the political science professors said the university welcomed the Embassy visit, but asked why it had taken "so long." He said Americans tended to come "after events" not before; however, Iraqis had come to welcome the U.S.'s "pragmatic nature." The professor said that U.S personal security details were unnecessary on campus because the students would protect their guests. Few scholarship opportunities had been made available to Iraqi students -- "you always talk about the Fulbright" but that's not enough. He referred to former Coalition Provisional Authority head Ambassador Paul Bremer's book, in which the CPA leader conceded he knew little about Iraq. The professor said that Americans would only really understand Iraq by talking to its poor and ordinary people. (The professor's last comment was

met with loud applause by the assembled students.)

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THE QUESTIONS  
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17. (U) Below are verbatim comments and questions from the 15 students who had time (amid many raised hands) to put forward their views to us in the two-hour informal session. A woman student asked the first question, in English.

WHY DID YOU INVADE? ...  
AND WHAT WAS YOUR STRATEGY?  
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--"I am a second-year student; you said that you focus on Shia parties -- what do you think of their ideology and thoughts?"; "And how can our government provide services if they lack money to spend?"

--"I am a third-year student; welcome to the university. I have three issues: political, economic, and security. Were these all achieved in Iraq? Did you have a strategy before you invaded? In 1991, you did not enter Iraq."

--"One of the justifications you used to invade Iraq was to spread democracy, but that led to creative chaos; which is your policy -- democracy or stability? What is your goal now in Iraq?"

--"With all of your strategy institutes and big resources, why didn't you have a realistic plan?"

SOFT POWER AND ACCOUNTABILITY;  
EX-PRESIDENT BUSH ON TRIAL  
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--"I am a 2nd-year student, what you really need to do is improve your relations between Iraqi and U.S. universities."

--"In the masters program, we want more opportunities but we lack English language opportunities. You should do more to help us learn your language. We have heard a lot of talk in the past, but no follow-up."

--"I study relations between the U.S. and Iraq. I refer to what Kissinger said, 'what is past is dead'".

--"I am a 3rd-year student. You occupied our country because you said you had three reasons: weapons of mass destruction, Iraq's ties to Al Qaeda and to get rid of a dictatorship. It has now been proven that there was no WMD and no link to Al Qaeda, but we did have a dictatorship and you helped us get rid of it. Can you now help the Iraqi people to try ex-President Bush because he is the man who caused the deaths of many Iraqis and many Americans? Can you help us file a case against him? (NOTE: loud clapping from most students followed these remarks and questions. END NOTE.)

BAGHDAD U.'S "ONLY NEO-CON SCHOLAR"  
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--"I am a PhD student focusing on American political ideology. I follow the conservative or right wing in your country. I am Baghdad University's only expert on the neo-cons, such as Cheney, Wolfowitz, Fukuyama. I also study the religious right and Falwell." (NOTE: this student expert on U.S. "neo-cons" was among the most excited to tell us his area of expertise, repeating several times that he was the "only" neo-con expert on campus. END NOTE)

A POST-SECTARIAN IRAQ?

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"You said you wanted to liberate Iraq, find the WMD and take down the former regime, but you found no WMD. I am a third-year student. Sectarianism increased but we removed it with our own blood and the sacrifices by our own people."

TROOPS GO HOME (SORT-OF)

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"Is the presence of your troops positive or negative? Some people will hear the lies and lies until they believe you. There will be no sovereignty for Iraq until all coalition troops are gone." (NOTE: the dean leaned over and commented that there were different views regarding the necessity of U.S. troops to stay in Iraq; this student's comments also appeared not to be shared by a majority of the other students. END NOTE.)

SADR CITY STATUS

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"I am a 3rd-year student from Sadr City. After your military operations there, more than 30 percent of buildings were damaged; do you have a plan to help rebuild Sadr City? Right now, we have had no water for the last two days." (NOTE: there appeared to be a full row of students sitting side-by-side from Sadr City -- Baghdad's vast and poorest district. After the session, two approached Poloffs for a group picture. END NOTE.)

OIL RESOURCES FOR ALL?

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"What about our oil fields and Article 112 (of the constitution) -- 80 percent are in the north and south. Will you take a role in that issue because Sunnis will be left out?"

HEALTH AND EDUCATION MOST IMPORTANT

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"The U.S. Army used weapons that have damaged our environment. This has increased the diseases among the people. The U.S. should show an interest in this; the top issues that matter most to the Iraqi people are education and health."

AMERICANS' TWO FACES

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"2nd-year student. We know that Americans have two faces; today, we are seeing the positive face. America is very interested in having a positive image in the world. We ask the U.S. Embassy to work to improve your image before the Iraqi people."

IS IRAQ SOVEREIGN?

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"I want to know if you think Iraq is a sovereign country now? Some proof could be that the Security Agreement put the Iraqi partner first." (NOTE: other students disagreed about how "sovereign" Iraq was given the continued presence of U.S. troops in the country; there seemed to be mixed, strong views on this point. END NOTE.)

BUDGET GAP

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-- "Will the U.S. help Iraq if our budget is bad because of low oil prices and the government does not have enough money to help the people?"

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COMMENT

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¶18. (SBU) Notably, one Poloff had said in his introduction that he specialized in Shia political parties. This led the dean of the department to stress that this kind of apparent one-party focus made the group feel "uncomfortable" -- as political scientists, he said, they treated all parties as equal subjects for analysis. Poloffs clarified that the U.S. Embassy had not picked any Iraqi party for special attention; the Political Section had experts for all. Later on, other students highlighted ongoing sensitivities surrounding "parties" in Iraq. This likely is due to past sectarian violence on campus tied to Iraq's political parties and their activities.

¶19. (SBU) Baghdad University is a key strategic "human capital" anchor in Iraq's largest city, its capital. Our two-hour engagement with the animated gathering of political science students showed that while most had seen a lot of American hard power since our 2003 invasion, not enough had experienced (or received answers to tough questions) regarding our soft power and overall policy objectives. The tone in the exchanges evolved quickly. Initially, the group appeared guarded, as did some of the faculty. Soon after our introductions, however, the students expressed appreciation for our candid replies to their pointed questions, critiques and suggestions. A few times, they openly laughed with us, especially during follow-on exchanges with the university's talkative, sole neo-con expert. And they ended the session by saying they wanted more frank engagements with us.

¶10. (SBU) We have tentatively outlined a plan to draw further and more regularly on the Embassy's expertise. Public Affairs has interacted in the past with the university and will continue to do so. The Political Section will propose holding weekly seminar-like discussions on political subjects, as well as consider sessions with high-level Embassy officials (and CODELS, possibly) to meet with vetted groups of university students in the future. As smart students of political science, the 120 or so within this Baghdad U. group inherently provide a needed USG policy, and perceptions, reality check. Which questions they wanted

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answered first from us revealed a lot -- framing both the challenges still ahead and possibilities.

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